

## Some Orientalists' Errors in Translating The Noble Quran

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Article Info	Abstract
<b>Article History</b>  Received: December 04, 2020  Accepted: February 02, 2021	<i>The present study explores mistakes made by orientalists in rendering the meaning of the Noble Quran. A number of actual examples from English and French translations are cited, along with analysis and explanation of the original meaning. It is found that some renditions do not observe accuracy in conveying the message of the scripture. These may also give negative misconceptions of the Islamic creed and legislation to the Western audience. Therefore, the scholarly or academic reputation of any orientalist cannot be solely reliable to take their Noble Quran translation, as well as their introduction and notes. Rather, such a translation needs to be reviewed and assessed by a neutral party.</i>
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### 1. Introduction

The Noble Quran is Prophet Muhammad's immortal miracle. It is aimed enlightening people's life, guiding them to the good of this life and the Hereafter. However, as is the case in each example of excellence, it is received accepted by some, received with reservation by others and rejected, or even fought by a third party. One of the various approaches to counter the Noble Quran is about raising misconceptions and false accusations, mainly by questioning its divine source or its content, with the latter leading to the former.

The present study reviews some instances of fake renderings of the Noble Quran made by a number of orientalists, attempting to spark scepticism that this scripture was revealed by Almighty Allah.

#### Significance and Objectives of the Study:

The study is aimed to achieve several objectives, such as:

1. Indicating the great risk of taking the orientalists' translations without revision
2. Providing examples of the orientalists' errors in their translations of the Noble Quran
3. Showing the lack of credibility and objectivity of some orientalists who claim to be committed to the ethics of academic research
4. Concluding the necessity of accredited bodies specialized in translating the Noble Quran, Prophet Muhammad's Sunnah and Arab heritage

#### Methodology and Plan of the Study:

The study follows the incomplete induction method in a bid to trace the orientalists' errors in translating the meaning of some verses in the Noble Quran. Then, the critical method is adopted to critique them and show their deviation from the purpose of the original.

The study is divided into two sections: theoretical and practical. The first introduces orientalists and provides an overview of the history of their relation with the Noble Quran. The second lists twelve errors made by orientalists in their translations of the Noble Quran.

### 1. Theory:

#### 1.1. Orientalists:

Orientalists are Western academic specialized in eastern languages, civilizations, philosophy, literature and religions. They are particularly involved in Arabic, the Arab civilization, Islamic faith and issues of the Arab World (Juḥā, 1982, 10).

The orientalist movement is said to have several religious, educational, economic and political objectives (Ramzan, et al., 2012, 67-69). They raised major objections to the Noble Quran, aiming to "challenge Muslims and Compete Islam" (Nasreen, 2013, 35). Such allegations centre on the compilation of the Quran, order of chapters, codices of Prophet Muhammad's companions and abrogation (Ibid, 36-46). Others are related to the attribution of the Quran to Almighty Allah, lack of new elements in the teachings of the scripture, contradiction between some parts, recording of some verses and different accents (Ramzan et al., 2012, 71-74).

## 1.2. Noble Quran Translation:

Scriptures are more challenging to render than most other texts. Since they hold sacred ideas, they should be translated with utmost accuracy. Translators are expected to “stick more closely to the original” (Al-Khawalda, 2004, 217).

Among these, the Noble Qur’an is a special text. For Muslims, it includes unique miracles in legislation, science, history, etc. It is considered by rhetoricians as the top standard of eloquence of Arabic. The form and meaning of this holy book are extraordinarily intertwined in a particular relationship, as it conveys ideas “in an inseparable identity with how it says it and that its literary power belongs squarely with its religious intent” (Zebiri, 2003, 97).

Another feature is the common use of persuasion, presented in allusion, parenthetical phrases, interrogation, exhortation or rebuke (Ibid).

The Noble Qur’an is generally believed to be “inimitable”, it “can only exist in its original language”, and it “cannot be understood fully by non-Arabic speakers” (Al-Kharabsheh and Al-Azzam, 2008, 1-2). It is described by those who have already translated it to be untranslatable, “because each time one returns to the Arabic text, he finds new meanings and fresh ways of interpreting”. Its lofty expression cannot have an equivalent match in any language (Al-Jabari, 2008, 19).

Hence, literal translation of the scripture is opposed by many. It is said to have “produced ponderous and laboured style in English” and, thus, led to “a difficulty in readability and understanding” (Abdul-Raof, 2001, 181-182).

Translators of the Noble Qur’an are challenged by the fundamental question of equivalence, which has seen extensive debates among translation scholars. As absolute synonymy does not exist between items of the same language, since each has its own associations and connotations, then how could complete equivalence of texts be found between different languages! Moreover, as such equivalence cannot be accomplished between texts composed by humans, then it is impossible to take place between Allah’s word and the human translation. Thus, the translator is required to strive to achieve as much equivalence as possible, taking into consideration the original contexts, culture-specific element and intended audience, among other factors.

It is argued that there are two ‘burdens’ (Khalidi, 2013, 1) on the Noble Quran translator. The first has to do with deciding on the best rendition of each word and phrase. That is, how can they tell what Almighty Allah means in His own book? The second is that no matter they think they have captured the point of the original, they would feel regret that more eloquent options may be made.

The first time Westerners had first-hand experience with the Noble Quran when some European monks came to learn in the schools of Andalusia. Later, they began to translate scientific books into their languages (Badawī, 1984, 5-8).

The first known complete translation of the Noble Quran was done into French in 1143 by Pierre le vénérable and published in 1543 (Ibid, 306). The translator claimed that he was assisted by a Muslim called Mohammad.

Most probably, this Mohammad mentioned on one of the five copies of the translation, is a fake character. In many cases, books were falsely attributed to Muslims who converted to Christianity in an attempt to promote such publications. More specifically, when it came to the translation of the Noble Quran, it was constantly claimed that the process departed from the original Arabic text, while the translator is kept anonymous (Alma‘āyirjī, 1407H, 71).

According to orientalist Blashère, the above translation was neither faithful nor complete of the original (Badawī, 1988, 127).

The next translation was done into German by Priest Abram Henckelman of Hamburg. It consisted of 560 pages and was published by SchultzioSchilleriana Press in 1694 (Al‘ānī, 2001, 22).

The introduction stated: “It is necessary to learn the Quran very well if we wish to fight it, and to pave the way for the promotion of Christianity in the East.” (‘amīra, 1999, 111)

Other orientalist took another track against the Noble Quran than translation. They questioned its origin and the integrity of our reception. That would create a pre-supposition in the receiver’s mind when reading the Noble Quran translation, so they would accept the mistakes which make the content of the scripture contradictory to reason. In addition, a number of orientalist publications raised misconceptions about the source and recording of the Noble Quran, such as:

2. *History of the Quranic Text* by Goldtziher (Azzaraklī, 1997, 1/108).
3. *The Sources of Islam* by Muir, London
4. *The Quran* by Wellhausen (Badawī, 1984, 408), East Germany Journal article
5. *Introduction to the Quran* by Blashère
6. *History of Islam* by Louis (Maṭbaqānī, 1995, 69), Cambridge.

## I. Practise:

Upon the above historical overview of the orientalist efforts related to the Noble Quran, this practical section analyses examples of errors made by orientalists when rendering the meanings of the Noble Quran.

It is shocking that Blashère argues that SidratAlmuntahā (the Lote Tree of the utmost boundary) is a place next to Mecca, and that Jannat Alma'wā (the Garden of the Abode) is a large villa surrounded by groves close to Mecca ('abduľmuħsin, 1423H, 560).

On the one hand, if the translator is given the benefit of the doubt, these instances show how little they know about content of the Noble Quran. Rather than adopting straightforward scientific research methods, they depend on guessing and incorrect pre-suppositions. On the other hand, the bizarre choices may be attributed to the major objective of many orientalist studies: the attempt to find out gaps in the Noble Quran to contest the credibility of Islam. In this case, they depart from the belief that the end justifies the means.

The following are major examples of such faults according to their position in the arrangement of the scripture:

#### **Example One:**

Almighty Allah says: "the *şibghah* (Religion) of God (Islām) and which *şibghah*(religion) can be better than God's? And we are His worshippers." (2: 138).

It was translated into English as "The *dye* of God! and who is better than God at *dyeing*? and we are worshippers of Him" (Palmer, 2017, 10)

The true meaning of *-ibghah* in the above verse is faith. The reason is that faith maintains a permanent impact on a person like dye on clothes, or because the one who accepts Islam immerses themselves in water (i. e. takes a bath) instead of baptism in Christianity (Alhararī, 2001, 3/325). The problem is that the metaphorical relation of *dye* is not clear between the substance and the spiritual effect of religion.

#### **Example Two:**

Almighty Allah says: "And God would never make your faith (prayers) to be lost." (2: 143).

The verse was translated into French by Blashere as "Allah ne pouvait faire se perdre votrefoi" ('awađ, 2003, 56).

The French version means "Allah could not make you lose your faith," which opposes the Islamic belief that Allah can always do anything, and nothing can challenge His power. Faith here refers to the prayer performed before the change of the Qibla from Jerusalem to Mecca. When some believers in the time of Prophet Mohammad wondered about Allah's acceptance of their own previous prayers or of those who died before the shift, the above verse explained that they were accepted as long as they were based on true faith (Riđā, 1990, 2/9).

#### **Examples Three:**

Almighty Allah says: "Those who took partners (in worship) with God will say: "If God had willed, we would not have taken partners (in worship) with Him, nor would our fathers, *and we would not have forbidden anything.*" (6: 148).

It was, strangely, translated into French by Savary as "Si Dieu eutvolulu, disent les idolatres, ni nous ninos p-res n'aurionsoffert de l'encens aux idoles. *on ne nous en a point fait la defense*"('awađ, 2003, 17). This means "We have never been deprived of it", which does not serve the original meaning of acting upon the prohibition.

#### **Example Four:**

Almighty Allah: "Those who follow the Messenger, the Prophet *who can neither read nor write* whom they find written with them in the Torah and the Gospel" (7: 157).

The word '*ummī*' was translated into English as "those who follow the Messenger, the Prophet *of the common folk*, whom they find written down with them in the Torah and the Gospel" (Arberry, 2003, 105).

The accurate meaning of '*ummī*' is one who can neither read nor write, and which was later used to cover the entire Arab nation as most of them were so (Al'alūsī, 1985, 6/388).

Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) says: "We are an *unlettered* people who can neither write nor count" (Albukhārī, 2002, 460). Therefore, he can never mean that Muslims are a pagan nation, as his message is all about combatting the causes and impacts of paganism.

#### **Example Five:**

Almighty Allah says: "Then when the *Sacred Months* have passed, then kill the Mushrikūn wherever you find them, and capture them and besiege them, and prepare for them each and every ambush." (9: 5).

It was translated into English as "Then, when the *sacred months* (*Rajab, Zil-Qada, Zil-Hejja and Muharram*) are drawn away, slay the idolaters wherever you find them, and take them, and confine them and lie in wait for them at every place of ambush" (Arberry, 2003, 115).

The problem is that the *sacred months* are not truly explained. In this context, they are not the 7th, 11th, 12th and 1st months of the lunar calendar, respectively, as is often the case. Rather, they refer to the grace period, already stated in verse (9: 2) given for the Arab idolaters since the pilgrimage of that year to choose a straightforward stand to Islam (Ibn Kathīr, 1999, 4/111). The above four months are not consecutive and, thus, do not serve the purpose of the previous verses in pledging security for those disbelievers until they make a final

decision.

**Example Six:**

Almighty Allah says: “And if any of the Mushrikun, (polytheists, idolaters, pagans, disbelievers in the Oneness of Allah) *seeks your protection, then grant him protection* so that he may hear the Word of Allah (the Qur’an), and then escort him to where he can be secure, that is because they are men who know not.” (9: 6).

It was relayed into English as “And if any one of the idolaters *asks thee for aid, then aid him*, in order that he may hear the word of God; then let him reach his place of safety,— that is, because they are a folk who do not know” (Palmer, 2017, 86).

As the scene continues from the previous example, Almighty Allah gives a chance for the Arab idolaters who deserve to be punished after the grace period to ask for security for their lives (Alṭabarī, 2001, 11/846). If they wish to learn about the Noble Quran, they should feel completely safe until they reach their destiny. Therefore, it is not about general aid, but about security of person. Granting asylum is one of the good manners encouraged by Islamic teachings, which is missing in the above version.

**Example Seven:**

Almighty Allah says: “And (there are) others who have acknowledged their sins, they have mixed a deed that was righteous with another that was evil. *Perhaps God will turn unto them in forgiveness*. Surely, God is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful.” (9: 102).

The verse was rendered into French by Jacques Berque as *D’autres reconnaissent leurs péchés : ils mêlent un comportement salutaire à un autre, mauvais. Peut-être Dieu se repentira-t-Il en leur faveur. — Il est Tout pardon, Miséricordieux* (Albayyūmī, 1999, 236).

**Example Eight:**

Almighty Allah says: “With Him is (the knowledge of) the unseen of the heavens and the earth. *How clearly He sees, and hears* (everything)!” (18: 26).

It was relayed into English by Rodwell as “With Him are the secrets of the Heavens and of the Earth: *Look thou and hearken unto Him alone* (Alkhaṭīb, 1427, 31).

The truth is that the original is an exclamation, aimed at proving the grandeur of Almighty Allah’s creation. Only he knows the Unseen of the Heavens and the Earth, their dwellers and others. It stresses His complete realization of everything that is heard or seen, which is beyond the limit of the abilities of all those hearing and seeing (Azzamakhsharī, 1997, 2/670).

**Example Nine:**

Almighty Allah says: “And you will see the angels *surrounding* the Throne (of God) from all round, glorifying the praises of their Lord (Allah).” (39: 75).

It was relayed into French by Savary as “Les anges, *les pieds nus* autour du trône sublime, publieront les louanges du Très-Haut.” The part *les pieds nus* means bare-footed (Khalīfa, 1993, 134). The truth is *ḥāffīn* means surrounding (Ashawkānī, 1994, 6/308).

**Example Ten:**

Almighty Allah says: “And among His Signs are the ships, in the sea, like *mountains*.” (42: 32).

It was translated into English by Jeffery as “And of his signs are the ships that run on sea like *landmarks*” (Huseyn, 2014, 304). A *landmark* often refers to a building that is easily noticed and could be used to judge one’s position. However, the original refers to *high mountains*, to which huge ships are likened (Ibn ‘āshūr, 1984, 25/105).

**Example Eleven:**

Almighty Allah says: “And We carried him on a (ship) made of planks and nails.” (54: 13).

It was relayed into French by Masson as “Nous avons porté sur un assemblage de planches et *de fibre de paliers*” (Banī ‘āmir, 2004, 398).

Strangely enough, *de fibre de paliers* refers to fibre palms, which is a totally different item from nails, which attach the planks tightly (Arrāzī, 1420H, 29/297).

**Example Twelve:**

Almighty Allah says: “And verily, he is violent in the love of *wealth*.” (100: 8).

It was translated by A. Jeffery into English as “Surely he is passionate in his love for *good things*” (Huseyn, 2014, 305). The truth is the general does not convey the specific meaning about wealth, as the context is about man’s greed and unthankfulness to Allah. The Arabic term *–eyr* is connected to another verse (2: 180) about bequeathing to parents and relatives (Alzuḥaylī, 1418H, 30/369).

## Conclusion

Based on the above examples, some of the orientalist's translations violate the general rules of faithfulness, objectivity and knowledge with regard to translation in general. Then, how about the considerations when rendering the meanings of the Noble Quran!

It is a necessity to warn against such false translations, which could negatively affect Western laymen who may have passion to learn about Islam through its basic constitution.

Furthermore, Muslim students who join universities dominated by such orientalist's can also be affected. Most of them are not expected to have a durable correct background which enables them make value judgements on their mentors' opinions.

As the Orientalists and missionaries realized the complex of degrees in the Muslim World, they recommended their universities to buy-- whoever they could of Muslims in return for certificates. Then, these students would be sent back to the Orient to become passive missionaries and, thus, establish the social and political behaviour desired in Muslim countries ('amīra, 1999, 11).

One can hardly find one student of such institutions who is not subject to their impact (Al'ānī, 2001, 10-12).

It is concluded that many erroneous translations of the Noble Quran are part of joint hostile projects with different roles and specializations, namely experts, businesses, organizations, missions, armies, foreign ministries, intelligence agencies, university staff members, academic institutes, orientalist's and policy makers (Said, 1981, 300).

To counter such organized actions through societies and institutions, little, individual efforts can never bear fruit. Specialized organizations should also bear the Ummah's responsibility of defending the Noble Quran.

## The major findings of the study can be summarized as follows:

1. Many orientalist's do not observe the objective rules of translation when relaying the meanings of the Noble Quran
2. There are examples of renditions of the meanings of the Noble Quran which provide a negative, mistaken image of the Islam faith and legislation.
3. As some orientalist's are said to be biased, their academic reputation shall not be trusted. In fact, their translations, introductions and notes.

## Finally, the study recommends the following:

1. Tracing and critiquing the mistakes of the Noble Quran translators
2. Founding a body to act as an accredited reference to referee the Noble Quran translation.

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